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ABSTRACT

Teachers in urban schools, on gaining seniority, frequently leave these culturally diverse and complex schools, only to be replaced by new teachers who are less prepared. This exploratory study examined the staffing patterns of elementary schools from 1991-1992 to 1993-1994 in the San Diego City School District (California), focusing on the policy that allows a teacher to change his or her school assignment after 3 years. Eighty elementary schools in a middle to high income area were compared with 74 schools in a low income area. Only about 10% of the schools did not fit the assumed income generalization. The comparison examined school size, achievement trends, characteristics of the recently hired school staff for 1991 to 1994, and school district teacher placement practices. The study documents that the most complex schools with regard to academic attainment and special populations of students (Chapter 1, homeless, migrant, and recent immigrants) have the least experienced teachers, suffer from low teacher morale, and have a curriculum that is less demanding academically. Many low-income schools have literally replaced their total teaching staff over a 3-year period. This policy creates a condition of unequal educational opportunity for students who need the most committed and able teachers. (Contains seven references.) (SLD)

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by

Alberto Ochoa and Raad Jerjis

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ABSTRACT

School Structures, School Size and Equal Opportunity: Teacher Placement Policy and the Need for Community Resistance

by
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Issue/Concern

Our large urban schools are complex environments with students who deserve an education equal to those received in other schools. However, such diversity is viewed as a barrier instead of a useful tool in these students' education. Teachers are unprepared and unsupported to make this paradigm shift to work effectively towards empowering these students, in fulfillment of the teacher's role as skilled change agent. Instead, teachers, upon gaining seniority, usually three or more years, exit these culturally diverse and complex schools, only to be replaced by teachers who are the least prepared and many doomed to fail due to their lack of preparation and support.

Background

The placement of recently credentialed teachers in the more complex educational environments creates a condition of disempowerment for students. The large majority of recently hired teachers are assigned to work in the most complex school settings, with minimum mentoring, and without regard as to what type of educational experiences are necessary to provide the best possible learning opportunities for linguistically and ethnically diverse children. San Diego City Schools (SDCSD), the sixth largest school district in the nation, has the existing policy and practice of allowing teachers with three or more years of experience to bid transfer to another school that has posted a vacancy. Such practice by omission or commission creates a condition by which the largest and more academically complex elementary schools in the district (e.g., Central, Emerson, Logan, Brooklyn, Hamilton, King) are consistently hiring the least experienced teachers.

Large urban schools also tend to have an incredibly diverse clientele (Plecki,1991). While student diversity could be a strong point of these large schools, increased diversity invariably leads to a more complex environment. A sensible practice would be to place teachers who have been prepared, mentored, and who have continual support in such schools. However, as is common practice in the SDCSD, first year teachers who are neither prepared nor supported to deal

ED 312536

with such complexities are placed in these schools, while other teachers upon gaining seniority, exit these schools. Resulting problems of these trends are that new teachers become overly frustrated in their beginning years and many quit the profession, while students do not receive any guidance as to how to cope with their teachers who are unprepared for such an environment.

To ignore the challenges student diversity presents is to deny the rights of these students' to a complete education. Consequently, the diversity of these students is not valued, and underprepared teachers try to assimilate these students to dominant norms. Furthermore, assimilationist practices are not necessarily avoided by sending teachers of color to these schools. What seems to be the crucial component to avoiding assimilation is proper preparation and support of teachers who enter such environments.

In addition, many of the low income school communities have overcrowded schools. In the impact of school size on student achievement Plecki (1991) in her study of The Relationship of Elementary School Size and Student Achievement in California Public Schools, states "...there are significant differences in student characteristics across enrollment categories, with higher percentages of students in poverty and students who are limited-English speakers in the two largest enrollment categories (more than 600 students)..." (p.75). Such findings suggest that large schools face the challenge of large numbers of students of low SES and limited English skills. Plecki also states that "There is a negative linear relationship between school size and student achievement in schools serving high concentrations (greater than 25%) of students in poverty" (p.82).

Furthermore, in smaller schools, teachers find more satisfying conditions. "Smaller schools have certain elements such as class size, close teacher-pupil relationships, and more personal attention that create an environment that promotes achievement for the individual" (Green & Stevens, 1988: p.12). According to the research synthesis on small schools studies (Friedkin & Necochea, 1988; Plecki, 1991) the findings suggests that large schools, especially those that serve low income students, will find it difficult to become good schools. Small schools have a better opportunity, than large schools of becoming good schools (Howley, 1989).

School change theory (Fullan, 1991) and change agent models (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978 ; Waugh, 1987) point to school structures and organizational climate as conditions that hinder or promote effective school staffing and educational programs. Using change theory and archival methodology, this study examined how the teacher placement practices and policies of a large K-12 urban school district in southern California is driven by school structural conditions such as school size and collective bargaining as two major factors that contribute against the effective staffing of schools attended by ethnically and linguistically diverse low income students. In the area of collective bargaining, the most recent agreement (1996) by the San Diego City school District calls for the establishment of a joint committee "to meet and discuss this issue and agree on a

proactive way of making certain that children in all communities are provided equal access to experienced teachers."

Methodology

This exploratory study examined the staffing patterns of elementary schools from the 1991-1992 to the 1993-1994 school year in the San Diego City School District. The study examined the existing policy that allows a teacher after three years to change their school assignment. For the most part, this schools are generally ethnically diverse, located in low incomes areas, and are overcrowded.

Sample: A comparison is made of 154 elementary schools divided by a major highway and attended by students whose families reside in the low income area of the urban school district, with those schools in middle to high income area of the urban school district. The highway creates a division in which 80 schools are situated north of Highway 8 (middle to high income) and 74 south of the highway (low income). Within this division, one finds about 10% of the schools that do not fit the assumed income generalization.

The comparison examines school size, achievement trends, characteristics of recently hired school staff for the years 1991 to 1994, and school district practices with respect to teacher placement and teacher rights to transfer to other school sites. The study documents how the most complex schools with regards to academic attainment and special population of students (Chapter I, homeless, migrant, and recent immigrants) are larger, have the least experienced teachers, suffer from teacher morale, and have a curriculum that is less demanding academically.

Research questions: The study was designed to understand the existing teacher placement practices that promote the staffing of low income schools with the least experienced teachers in a large urban school district. The exploratory study was guided by two questions using district documents and archival data:

1. What are the staffing patterns of schools that are linguistically and ethnically diverse and located in the low income areas of a large urban school district?
2. What are the differences in the staffing patterns of schools located in both the low income and upper income areas of a large urban school district?

Procedures: The Human Resource Service Division of the SDCSD, responsible for personnel issues and the recruitment and hiring of school personnel, was requested to provide data over a three year period (1991-92, 1992-93, 1993-94) by elementary school and by four categories of teachers. These categories included probationary I, probationary II, leave replacement (teachers subbing for a teacher on leave), and teachers who hold an emergency credential. These four categories in general represent a group of teachers who

have no tenure and are the least experienced. In the case of emergency credentialed teachers, they have not completed their teacher education program. Using these lists an analysis of the data was undertaken to identify trends and patterns by schools north and south of a major dividing highway.

In addition, achievement data on districtwide testing results on English speaking students, Stanford Achievement Test, for 5th grade, for the 1994 year was used to develop a profile of the achievement trends by school in order to compare the school results with the district median test scores for the content areas of total reading, total language, and total math.

Furthermore, pupil racial/ethnic census data was also used in the development of school profiles. To determine the level of school overcrowding, the district school overcrowding interim matrix was used. This matrix provides the physical characteristics of the school, including student enrollment, acres, pupil per acre, and a ranking from 1 to 6, with ranking 1 being severely distressed, 2 being distressed, 3 substantially below guidelines, and 4 being below guidelines, the categories 5 and 6 meeting guidelines.

Limitations. The data only examined the staffing and physical characteristics of 154 elementary schools of SDCSD for the period of 1991-1994. Archival data was used to examine school characteristics for the sixth largest school district in the nation.

Findings

1. Once a teacher has three years of experience s/he bids to transfer to another school. They are replaced by substitutes, emergency credentialed teachers, or by the most recently credentialed teacher. As gifted as many of these teacher are, they have received a year or less of training, while lacking the experience to bridge theory and practice. As a consequence, many of the low income schools have literally replaced their total teaching staff over a three year period.

2. District policy and collective bargaining agreements on teacher placement perpetuates an unequal access to quality education for school communities that are linguistically and ethnically diverse. Teachers with the least experience are placed in the more complex schools. This practice is driven by seniority and tenure rights and is part of the collective bargaining contractual agreement.

3. The existing practice of hiring and placing the more recently credentialed teachers in the schools that have the greatest percent of linguistically and ethnically diverse students, the highest social mobility rates, have the most overcrowded conditions, and have the highest academic achievement gaps creates a condition of unequal educational opportunity for students that need the most committed and able teachers.

4. When examining the placement of emergency credentialed teachers, teachers in training, a significant pattern is visible. The placement of teachers over a three year (1991-1994) period indicates 170 emergency credentialed teachers were placed in middle to upper income school communities. In these school communities, three schools account for 56 of the emergency credentialed teachers--Lindbergh-Schweitzer, Lafayette and Riley. In comparison, 470 emergency credentialed teachers were placed in the low income school communities. Thus, low income schools have a ratio of 1 to 2.76 emergency credentialed teachers than middle or upper income schools. This ratio is also consistent across all non-tenure teachers hired by the district. Low income schools have a higher ratio than middle to upper income schools by 1 to 2.62 of all non-tenured teachers hired during the period of 1991-1994.

5. Unequal placement of non-tenured teachers is evident in the low incomes schools of SDCSD. Of the 74 schools situated south of the dividing highway, the low income area of the district, 27 schools or 36% have hired 20 or more non-tenured teachers. In comparison, of the 80 schools in the middle and upper income area of the district only 3 schools have hired 20 or more non-tenured teachers.

6. Eight schools (Central, Emerson, Logan, Brooklyn, Hamilton, King, Jackson and Sherman) have hired 50 to 89 non-tenured teachers during the three year period of 1991 to 1994. In general, a school with 1000 students has a teaching staff of about 30 to 35 teachers. Thus, these schools have replaced their school staff at least once, while creating instability and low continuity in the core curriculum. Furthermore, these eight schools are located in low income areas; all have over 92% ethnically diverse student populations that are predominantly Latino, Asian, African American, and other ethnic groups; all have a school student enrollments that range from 902 to 1436 (1995 data); all have a designated overcrowding ranking of 1 or 2 which is severely distressed to distressed in relation to school district guidelines; and all have large numbers of linguistically diverse English learners (CSBE R-30, 1995). All of the eight schools are achieving below the district median test scores in the three content areas. In reading all school scores range between -13 to -30 points below the district median (50%); in language all school scores range from -16 to -37 points below the district median (56%); and in math all school scores range from -19 to -37 points below the district median (53%). Inequality of staffing exits in these school communities, and such condition contribute to student disempowerment.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that changes are imperative in the teacher placement practices in our SDCSD. Our large urban schools are complex

environments with ethnically and linguistically diverse students who deserve an education equal to those received in other schools. However, many of the school communities where such diversity exists are used as temporary training grounds in preparation for smaller and better school sites and assignments. Teachers, upon gaining seniority, exit these complex diverse schools, only to be replaced by teachers who are doomed to fail due to their lack of preparation and support. School district policy and collective bargaining agreements perpetuate a condition that yields inequality. School communities that require the most experienced teachers generally have the least experienced and the least prepared teachers to address complex educational needs.

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